

**SEXUAL BELIEFS, INTERPERSONAL PERCEPTION
AND SEXUAL SATISFACTION**

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Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this assignment is my own original work, and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Abstract

This study investigated the correlation between sexual beliefs, as well as the interpersonal perception of sexual beliefs within a marriage, and the dyadic adjustment and sexual satisfaction.

Participants were 38 couples, married less than 10 years. Each participant completed the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale, Index of Sexual Satisfaction and the Sexual Irrationality Questionnaire. Each participant was also requested to complete the latter questionnaire as he/she would expect his/her partner to complete it.

A significant relationship was found between sexual satisfaction and dyadic adjustment, as well as between spouses' sexual beliefs and their perceptions of their partners' sexual beliefs. No support was found for the hypotheses that the interpersonal perception of sexual beliefs would correlate with either sexual satisfaction or marital adjustment.

Opsomming

In hierdie studie is die verband tussen seksuele kennisies, sowel as die interpersoonlike persepsie van seksuele kennisies binne huweliksverband, en huweliksaanpassing en seksuele satisfaksie nagegaan.

Deelnemers aan die ondersoek was 38 pare wat korter as 10 jaar getroud was. Hulle het elkeen die Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale, Index of Sexual Satisfaction en die Sexual Irrationality Questionnaire voltooi. Elke deelnemer moes laasgenoemde vraelys ook voltooi soos hy/sy verwag het sy/haar huweliksmat dit sou voltooi.

'n Beduidende verband is tussen seksuele satisfaksie en huweliksaanpassing gevind, asook tussen egliede se eie seksuele kennisies en hulle beoordelings van hulle huweliksmats se seksuele kennisies. Geen ondersteuning kon in die hipotese gevind word aan die interpersoonlike persepsie van seksuele kennisies met óf seksuele satisfaksie óf huweliksaanpassing verband sou hou nie.

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1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 The Importance of Sexual Satisfaction

Sexuality and sexual satisfaction play an essential role in marriage. Around and Pauker (in Larson, Anderson, Holman, & Niemann, 1998) found that 97% of newlyweds considered their sex life to be either “very important” or “somewhat important” in their marriage. The importance of sexual activity was also emphasized by Ventegoth (1998) who, in a study of 2460 Danish citizens, indicated that people without a satisfying sex life scored 13.8% below the population mean on a quality-of-life questionnaire.

Most international studies indicated that married people are on the whole sexually satisfied in their marriages (Byers, Demmons, & Lawrance, 1998; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997). McCarthy (1999) however indicated that when sexuality in a relationship is dysfunctional, it could play an inordinately powerful role in the quality of the relationship.

1.2 Definition of Sexual Satisfaction

According to Byers (1999) no generally accepted or consistently used conceptual definition of sexual satisfaction exists either in research or in clinical literature. Lawrance and Byers (1995) concluded that poor conceptualisation of the construct of sexual satisfaction is hampering research in this field. Considerable research has been done on sexual dysfunction and sexual problems, but according to Cooper and Stoltenburg, the effective enhancement of sexual satisfaction has received little attention in research (Byers, 1999).

Rust and Golombok (1986) raised the question of how to define the quality of sexual satisfaction in a relationship. They indicated that objective parameters, such as frequency of sexual intercourse or incidence of unsuccessful attempts, provide one possibility. The shortcoming of such an approach is that frequency of sexual intercourse is not always associated with any sexual dysfunction and/or dissatisfaction. Some people claim to be satisfied despite a lack of sexual contact.

Byers et al. (1998) defined sexual satisfaction in terms of an interpersonal exchange model as “an affective response arising from one’s subjective evaluation of the positive and negative dimensions associated with one’s sexual relationship” (p. 258). This definition contains both affective and evaluative components and thus distinguishes satisfaction from purely affective constructs or purely evaluative constructs (Byers, 1999).

In the present study the concept of sexual satisfaction or dissatisfaction is defined in terms of the magnitude of a problem in the sexual component of a dyadic relationship as seen by the respondent (Hudson, Harrison, & Crosscup, 1981).

1.3 Sexual Satisfaction and Marital Adjustment

Research has consistently shown a significant positive relationship between sexual satisfaction and marital adjustment (Byers & Demmons, 1999; Renaud, Byers, & Pan, 1997; Sprecher, 1998). These studies found correlations ranging from .41 to .68 between sexual satisfaction and marital adjustment. Recent reports have noted the need for more research in marital sexuality (Apt, Hurlbert, & Clark, 1994).

1.4 Sexual Satisfaction and Cognitive Processes

From the beginning of the twentieth century until the late 1960's, sexual dysfunction and dissatisfaction were typically treated from a psychoanalytic framework (Rosen & Weinstein, 1988). According to Wiederman (1998) the emphasis on sex therapy was a result of an earlier cultural shift towards a greater focus on increased sexual gratification and discussion of sexual issues. Cultural changes brought about a decline in patients seeking sex therapy, due to their problems being addressed successfully from direct, educational approaches by the mass media.

From the cognitive perspective to psychotherapy it is postulated that emotional problems and disturbed relationships are associated with irrational or dysfunctional thoughts or schemas (Jordan & McCormick, 1988). Crowther and Zeiss (1999) indicated that in cognitive therapy the therapist assists the patient in identifying thought patterns that are likely to result in negative affect. Consistent with this view Epstein (1986) postulated that specific unrealistic beliefs about the nature of marital relationships are more highly predictive of marital maladjustment than general irrational beliefs.

Theorists from a cognitive approach emphasize that beliefs about sexuality determine the positive and negative experience of sensual and sexual satisfaction (Barlow, 1986). However, little is known about the relationship between dysfunctional beliefs and sexual functioning (Adams et al., 1996). Jordan and McCormick (1988) indicated that sexual irrationality might be treated as separate though related aspects of human cognition, while Epstein (1986) believed that clinicians working with couples and treat sexual dysfunctions showed focus on relationship-specific beliefs instead of general, irrational thought processes. Andersen and Cyranowski (1994) described the concept of a sexual

self-schema and defined it as an aspect of one's self-view, but specific to one's sexuality. According to them sexual self-schemas are "cognitive generalisations about sexual aspects of oneself that are derived from past experiences, manifest in current experience, influential in the processing of sexually relevant social information, that guide sexual behavior" (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994, p. 1079).

Larson et al. (1998) pointed to the important reciprocal effect the perceptions or behavior of one spouse may have on the perceptions, behavior, and sexual satisfaction of the other member of the dyad. They found that wives' premarital self-esteem, their premarital open communication, and premarital relationship stability determined 37% of the variance in their husbands' sexual satisfaction.

However, in general very little research has been done till now on sexual beliefs and schemas.

1.5 Sexual Satisfaction and Attitude Similarity

The role of interpersonal perception, i.e. the way people perceive themselves and their partners in a relationship, has been implicated as an important indicator of marital adjustment (Creamer & Campbell, 1988). They investigated the role of interpersonal perception in dyadic adjustment in terms of the personality characteristics of spouses, while Möller and van Zyl (1991) and Möller and van der Merwe (1997) investigated the association between dyadic satisfaction and the interpersonal perception of relationship beliefs. Creamer and Campbell (1988) indicated that three factors have to be taken into consideration with regard to interpersonal perception: (1) the judge's self-description; (2) the judge's prediction of the other's self-description; and (3) the self-description of the

person being judged. By comparing (1) and (3), it is possible to measure real similarity (RS), or the degree to which the judge and the judged are actually alike in terms of the criteria that are being judged. According to Ellis, DiGuiseppe, Mattia, Sichel, and Yeager (1989), two people can have similar irrational thoughts, but have minimal relationship problems because their thoughts compliment one another. A comparison of (1) and (2) will indicate a measure of assumed similarity (AS), that is, the overlap between the judge's self-description and his or her prediction of the other's self-description. Finally, by comparing (2) and (3) accuracy (Acc) can be measured, that is, the degree with which the judge can predict the other's self-description.

Cupach and Metts (1995) indicated that little research attention has been given to sexual attitude similarity in couples. They found that sexually involved partners have significant higher levels of real similarity in sexual attitudes than randomly assigned pairs. However, they identified a need for further studies in the field of perceived similarity and accuracy between partners in terms of sexual cognition.

1.6 Summary

From the preceding review, the following is evident.

- Despite the strong association between sexual satisfaction and the quality of dyadic relationships, the enhancement of sexual satisfaction has received little attention in research.
- From a cognitive-behavioral perspective, it is postulated that sexual dissatisfaction is associated with dysfunctional beliefs about sexuality and sexual functioning or dysfunctional sexual self-schemas. However, very little research has been done to test

this hypothesis, or to identify the dysfunctional beliefs or schemas associated with sexual dissatisfaction.

- Research results tentatively indicate that interpersonal perception of personality characteristics and relationship beliefs may be associated with marital adjustment. However, almost no research has been done on the interpersonal perception of sexual beliefs and its relationship to marital and sexual satisfaction. Only one study was identified in which sexual attitude similarity in couples was investigated.

2. OBJECTIVE

Consequently, the objective of the present study was (1) to investigate the association between sexual beliefs and marital and sexual satisfaction, and (2) to determine to what extent the accuracy of a spouse's perception of his or her partner's sexual beliefs and the similarity between their sexual beliefs are associated with their levels of sexual satisfaction and marital adjustment.

3. METHOD

3.1 Participants

Thirty-eight married couples participated in the study. Their mean age was 30 years (SD = 3.83). Preferred language was Afrikaans for 69.3% of the participants and English for 30.7%. They were on average married for 5.42 years (SD = 2.67), and had on average one child. They were recruited from a middle-class suburban area near Cape Town. Couples were included into the study only if they were married for 10 years or less and if no member of the dyad was taking medication influencing sexual desire or performance.

3.2 Questionnaires

The following instruments were included in the study: Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS; Busby, Christensen, Crane, & Larson, 1995; Crane, Bean, & Middleton, 2000), Index of Sexual Satisfaction (ISS; Hudson et al., 1981), and Sexual Irrationality Questionnaire (SIQ; Jordan & McCormick, 1988).

3.2.1 Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale

The RDAS (Busby et al., 1995), a revised and shortened version of the DAS (Spanier, 1976), is a 14-item Likert-type scale to assess marital satisfaction. A spouse is asked to indicate on a 5-point scale the extent of agreement or disagreement between him/herself and his/her partner regarding eleven different aspects of their marriage and the occurrence of three different events in their marriage. It renders three sub-scales: Dyadic Consensus, Dyadic Satisfaction and Dyadic Cohesion. A score below 48 indicates marital distress. Busby et al. (1995) reported a Guttman split-half reliability coefficient of .94 for the RDAS, as well as adequate levels of construct validity and internal consistency (Cronbach alpha = .90). According to Crane et al. (2000) the RDAS distinguishes sufficiently between distressed and non-distressed married individuals.

3.2.2 Index of Sexual Satisfaction

The ISS is a self-report 5-point Likert-type scale with 25 questions, measuring the degree and magnitude of sexual discord or dissatisfaction in one's relationship with a partner. Hudson et al. (1981) indicated that the items were developed on the basis of clinical and personal experience, and was structured to be as specific as possible without imposing on the sensitivities or the right of privacy of the respondent. They indicated that 19 of the 25 questions refer directly to some aspect of the quality of the sexual relationship, and the

remaining six items reflect positive and negative consequences of the quality of the sexual relationship, or are measures that influence its quality. Total scores range between 1 and 100, with a cut-off score of 28. A score above 28 indicates sexual dissatisfaction. Hudson et al. (1981) demonstrated internal consistency and test-retest reliability in excess of .90, and a discriminant coefficient of .76. The ISS also succeeded in classifying 87% of cases correctly in terms of presence or absence of sexual problems.

3.2.3 Sexual Irrationality Questionnaire

The SIQ was derived from myths associated with sexual dysfunctions described by prominent clinicians such as Barbach, Ellis, McCary, and Zilbergeld (Jordan & McCormick, 1988). This questionnaire is based on the three “musturbatory” ideologies described by Ellis. Ten items were designed to measure the irrational belief: “I must perform well sexually and win approval of others”. Another ten items were designed to measure the irrational belief: “You/sexual partners must treat me precisely the way I want”. Twelve items were designed to measure irrational beliefs falling into the category: “The world must be fair and make sex easy for me” (Jordan & McCormick, 1988). However, factor analysis of this scale failed to break down into these three categories indicated by Ellis. Jordan and McCormick (1988) concluded that irrational thoughts on sex are not separate classes of the three “musturbatory” ideologies. These thoughts coexist within specific cognitive categories organised according to overriding schemas such as low frustration tolerance, stereotypes and conformity.

The questions assess beliefs that might contribute to sexual problems and difficulties with intimacy. The questionnaire consists of 32 questions and participants are asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with these statements, using a 6-point

Likert-scale. Irrational items are scored reversely. The least irrational score would be 0 and the most irrational score would be 160.

The scale demonstrated internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha coefficient = .73), good concurrent validity, but test-retest reliability had not been determined (Jordan & McCormick, 1988).

In the present study participants' interpersonal perception of their partner's sexual cognitions was also assessed. The instruction for the SIQ were therefore extended to include the spouse's perception of his or her partner's beliefs. Questions containing "I" were changed with "my partner", and "my partner" with "I".

3.3 Procedure

Participants were recruited from a middle-class suburban area near Cape Town. Approximately 100 homes in the area were visited by the researcher. Couples were informed about the objective of the study, and if a couple met the criteria for inclusion in the study, they were invited to participate. Approximately 60 couples met the criteria, and 45 couples agreed to participate in the study. Thirty-eight couples eventually completed the questionnaires.

The questionnaires were completed in the following order: (1) Index of Sexual Satisfaction, (2) Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale, (3) Sexual Irrationality Questionnaire for him/herself and (4) the Sexual Irrationality Questionnaire as he/she thought his/her partner would complete it. Instructions were given verbally as well as in writing. Each member of the dyad completed the questionnaires separately, without discussing it with his/her partner. Assurance of confidentiality was given. It was also arranged to provide

those couples interested, with a summary of the findings. A contact number was given to discuss problems that may have arisen as a result of participation in the study.

4. RESULTS

Mean scores and standard deviations for marital satisfaction (RDAS), sexual satisfaction (ISS) and sexual beliefs (SIQ) are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Marital Satisfaction (RDAS), Sexual Satisfaction (ISS) and Sexual Beliefs (SIQ)

	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
RDAS	45.8	9.8
ISS	26.3	13.93
SIQ (Self)	122.5	13.25
SIQ (Partner)	121.6	13.16

In 16 couples both members of the dyad indicated marital distress (scores below 48 on the RDAS), while an additional 11 participants experienced marital distress while their partners did not. A total of 42 (55%) of the 76 individuals indicated marital distress.

In 10 couples both members of the dyad showed sexual dissatisfaction, while an additional 24 indicated sexual dissatisfaction while their partners did not. A total of 44 (58%) of the 76 participants showed sexual dissatisfaction.

The association between sexual beliefs and marital and sexual satisfaction was investigated by means of Pearson correlations between scores on the SIQ and the RDAS and ISS (Table 2).

Table 2

Pearson Correlations between Sexual Beliefs (SIQ), Marital Adjustment (RDAS) and Sexual Satisfaction (ISS)

	Sexual Beliefs	
	Spouse	Spouses' Perception
Marital adjustment	.16	.35*
Sexual satisfaction	-.21	-.36*

* $p < .05$

A significant negative relationship ($r = -.63$; $p < .001$) was found between scores on the RDAS and the ISS for the 76 participants, indicating that higher marital satisfaction is associated with higher sexual satisfaction.

A spouse's own sexual beliefs correlated significantly ($r = .72$; $p < .001$) with his/her perception of the other member of the dyad's sexual beliefs. However, Table 2 shows that the correlation coefficients between a spouse's sexual beliefs and marital and sexual satisfaction were not significant. Significant Pearson correlations were found between participants' perception of their spouses' sexual beliefs and marital and sexual satisfaction.

The association of sexual satisfaction with real similarity, assumed similarity and accuracy in sexual beliefs was investigated by means of Pearson correlations. Table 3 presents the correlations for both high and low ISS groups (above and below 28 on the ISS). To determine the significance of differences between high and low groups, the correlations were transformed by means of Fisher's z . No significant differences were found between the groups.

Table 3

Pearson Correlations indicating Real Similarity, Assumed Similarity, and Accuracy in Sexual Beliefs for High and Low Sexually Satisfied Groups

Sexual Beliefs	Sexual Satisfaction	
	High	Low
Real similarity	.41	.19
Female assumed similarity	.11	.40
Male assumed similarity	.16	-.01
Female accuracy	.15	.16
Male accuracy	.02	.11

The association of dyadic adjustment with real similarity, assumed similarity and accuracy in sexual beliefs was investigated by means of Pearson correlations. Table 4 presents the correlations for both high and low RDAS groups (above and below 48 on the RDAS). To determine the significance of differences between high and low groups, the correlations were transformed by means of Fisher's *z*. No significant difference was found between the groups.

Table 4

Pearson Correlations indicating Real Similarity, Assumed Similarity, and Accuracy in Sexual Beliefs for High and Low Marital Adjustment Groups

Sexual Beliefs	Marital Adjustment	
	High	Low
Real similarity	.14	-.10
Female assumed similarity	-.15	-.16
Male assumed similarity	-.07	-.24
Female accuracy	.51	-.17
Male accuracy	-.05	.14

5. DISCUSSION

A significant correlation of .63 was found between sexual satisfaction and marital adjustment, indicating that better dyadic adjustment in this sample was associated with higher levels of sexual satisfaction and vice versa. This finding is consistent with results from previous studies indicating correlation coefficients between sexual satisfaction and marital adjustment, ranging between .41 and .68 (Beyers & Demmons, 1999; Renaud et al., 1997; Sprecher, 1998).

A significant correlation coefficient was found for spouses' assessment of their own sexual beliefs and their perceptions of their partners' sexual beliefs. This means that spouses who rated their own sexual beliefs favorably also tended to assess their partners' sexual beliefs as such.

However, no significant relationship was found between a spouses assessment of his/her own sexual beliefs and marital adjustment or sexual satisfaction. This is an unexpected finding, because in terms of cognitive-behavioral theory, it is postulated that sexual beliefs would be associated with sexual satisfaction/dissatisfaction and marital adjustment. What is equally surprising is that although spouses' assessment of their own sexual beliefs did not correlate with sexual and marital adjustment, their perceptions of their partners' sexual beliefs did. There is no simple explanation for this discrepancy, but it may indicate that there is some kind of association between sexual beliefs and marital and sexual satisfaction, which the present study failed to identify.

With regards to the interpersonal perception of sexual beliefs, the present findings indicated no discrepancies in real similarity (the degree to which spouses are actually

alike in terms of sexual beliefs), assumed similarity (the degree of overlap between a spouse's sexual beliefs and his/her prediction of his/her partner's sexual beliefs), and accuracy (the degree to which a spouse can predict his/her partner's sexual beliefs), between high and low sexual satisfaction couples and high and low marital adjustment couples.

These findings are inconsistent with results by Cupach and Metts (1995), which indicated that sexually involved partners have significant higher levels of similarity in sexual attitudes than randomly assigned pairs. They measured six sexual attitudes in their investigation: Sexual Permissiveness, Sexual Responsibility, Sexual Communion, Sexual Instrumentality, Sexual Conventionality, and Sex Avoidance. The correlation coefficients which they found indicating similarity in sexual attitudes, however, were not high and ranged between .25 and .38. Their explanation for this finding was that only some level of agreement is needed in a relationship regarding sexual similarity, and once that level is reached, additional agreement is superfluous. Their alternative explanation was that perceived similarity in sexual attitudes increase over time, whereas actual agreement does not. They pointed out that a need exists for further research in this area, in order to examine the influence of perceived similarity in couples' sexual attitudes.

The present findings regarding the interpersonal perception of sexual beliefs are also not consistent with the results from studies by Creamer and Campbell (1988), and Möller and van der Merwe (1997) and Möller and van Zyl (1991). These studies found a relationship between dyadic adjustment and the interpersonal perception of personality characteristics (Creamer & Campbell, 1988), and relationship beliefs (Möller & van der Merwe, 1997;

Möller & van Zyl, 1991). These studies supplied tentative indications of a relationship between dyadic adjustment and similarity and accuracy in interpersonal perception.

Our possible explanation for the negative results of the present study may be found in the contents of the Sexual Irrationality Questionnaire. It may be that the sexual beliefs and attitudes sampled by the questionnaire do not fully correspond to the sexual beliefs of participants to the present study, due to possible cultural differences. Future studies of this nature may do well to ascertain the appropriateness of measures of sexual beliefs within a specific cultural context, before investigating the interpersonal perception of sexual beliefs. In addition, Cupach and Metts (1995) suggested that perceived similarity in sexual attitudes may increase over time, whereas actual agreement does not. The average duration of the marriages of couples included in the present study was 5.42 years. It may be that this was insufficient time to develop insight into and understanding of the partners' sexual beliefs, thereby explaining the negative results relating to interpersonal perception of sexual beliefs, found in the present study. Future studies should therefore include marriages or relationships of longer duration and, to test this hypothesis by Cupach and Metts (1995), compare marriages of longer and shorter duration in terms of the interpersonal perception of sexual beliefs.

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